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ABSTRACT

A statement officially adopted by the Board of Directors of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is presented. The position is taken that the amount and effects of racism and bias in English and Language Arts educational materials cannot be ignored. Specifically, educational materials now suffer from the following crucial deficiencies: (1) inadequate representation of literary works by members of non-white minorities in general anthologies, (2) representation of minority groups which is demeaning, insensitive, or unflattering to the culture, (3) inclusion of only popular and proven works by a limited number of "acceptable" writers, (4) biased commentaries which gloss over or flatly ignore the oppression suffered by non-white minority persons, and (5) other commentaries in anthologies which depict inaccurately the influence of non-white minority persons on literary, cultural, and historical developments in America. It is recommended that: (1) Literature anthologies commit themselves to fair and balanced inclusion of the work of non-white minority group members; (2) Illustrations and photographs present as accurate and balanced a picture of non-white minorities and their environments as is possible in the total context of the educational materials; (3) Dialect be appropriate to the setting and characters; and (4) Literary criticism draw as heavily as possible from the critical writers of non-white minorities. (CK)

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CRITERIA FOR TEACHING MATERIALS IN READING AND LITERATURE

During the 1969 annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Washington, D.C., the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors approved the formation of an NCTE Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. The Task Force was charged, in part, to prepare a statement on the nature and frequency of racism in English textbooks, to provide a set of guidelines for publishers, selection committees and others, and to define at least for the present the Council's position on this difficult issue.

Over the past year, the Task Force has worked to produce this statement on Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature, which was first accepted by the Executive Committees of the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and then officially adopted by the NCTE Board of Directors at the annual meeting in Atlanta on November 26, 1970.

We thank you for your interest in this present statement of Council policy and hope that you will share it with other members of your organization.

Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English

National Council of Teachers of English

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CRITERIA FOR TEACHING MATERIALS IN READING AND LITERATURE

OF THE

NCTE TASK FORCE ON RACISM AND BIAS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

This statement has been officially adopted by the Board of Directors of the National Council of Teachers of English after prior acceptance by the Executive Committees of the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the National Council of Teachers of English. It is a positive response to the educational objective and the social and cultural concern that the truth and reality of our nation's history and literature be embodied in its texts and other teaching materials, and that includes the fact of the racial and ethnic diversity of its peoples.

Of all the minority groups in the United States, the non-white minorities (American Indians, Asian-Americans, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, et al.), more than any others, suffer crippling discrimination in jobs, housing, civil rights, and education, and face a school curriculum which in their terms is culturally impoverished. The consequences of oppression make themselves most visible in major urban centers. But these consequences, if less overt, are just as real in rural America.

By comparison, the amount and effects of racism and bias in English and Language Arts educational materials might seem insignificant. But they are not and cannot be ignored. In the course of his education a student acquires more than skills and knowledge. He also finds and continues to modify his image of himself, and he shapes his attitudes toward other persons, races, and cultures. To be sure, the school experience is not the sole force that shapes self-images and attitudes toward others. But in the measure that school does exert this influence, it is essential that the materials it provides foster in the student not only a self-image deeply rooted in a sense of personal dignity, but also the development of attitudes grounded in respect for and understanding of the diversity of American society.

The accomplishment of these ends is a responsibility and obligation of those involved in English and Language Arts programs. Therefore, continuing action to accomplish them is the obligation and responsibility of teachers, curriculum planners, textbook selection committees, local and state education authorities, designers of learning systems, and publishers.

Specifically, educational materials now suffer from the following crucial deficiencies:

--the inadequate representation of literary works by members of non-white minorities in general anthologies which serve as basic texts and in basal readers and other Language Arts kits inclusive of audio-visual materials, in most elementary, secondary, and college English courses;

--representation of minority groups which is demeaning, insensitive, or unflattering to the culture;

--the inclusion of only popular and proven works by a limited number of "acceptable" writers, resulting in a misrepresentation of the actual range of the group's contribution to literature;

--biased commentaries which gloss over or flatly ignore the oppression suffered by non-white minority persons; and

--still other commentaries in anthologies which depict inaccurately the influence of non-white minority persons on literary, cultural, and historical developments in America.

Because conventional English courses and reading programs constitute the bulk of the Language Arts taught in elementary and secondary schools and colleges and because they are frequently organized around an anthology, a basic text, or a single learning program, it is to the publishers of such texts, and to the designers of systems approaches to learning, and to the bodies that adopt them, and to the teachers who use them that the following criteria are addressed:

A. Literature anthologies intended as basic texts and having inclusive titles and/or introductions must commit themselves to fair (more than token representation) and balanced (reflecting diversity of style, subject matter, and social and cultural view) inclusion of the work of non-white minority group members. This includes, but is not limited to the following:

    Collections embracing the whole of American literature
    Collections of generic materials
    Collections of materials from a given historical period
    Collections of materials from a given geographic region

   To do less than this is to imply that non-white minority groups are less capable, less worthy, less significant than white American writers.

B. Non-white minorities must be represented in basic texts in a fashion which respects their dignity as human beings and mirrors their contributions to American culture, history, and letters. This means that hostile or sentimental depictions of such groups must be balanced with amicable and realistic ones in an effort to present a balanced and non-prejudicial picture.

C. In collections and parts of collections where a writer is represented by only one selection, the basis for its inclusion must be explained.

D. Illustrations and photographs must present as accurate and balanced a picture of non-white minorities and their environments as is possible in the total context of the educational materials.

E. Dialect, when it appears, must not be exaggerated or inconsistent, but appropriate to the setting and the characters. Where the risk is courted that the preponderance or exclusive appearance of dialect materials, including representations of the speech of bilingual Americans, is suggestive of cultural insensitivity, it should be balanced with an explanatory note which effectively places that dialect in accurate historical-linguistic context.

F. Editorial and critical commentary must not ignore the role played by non-white minority writers in the continuing literary development. Literary criticism, whether short quotations from critical writings or collections of critical essays, must draw as heavily as possible from the critical writers of non-white minorities. This is equally important in discussing works by or about members of the same group.

G. Historical commentary and interpretations must not present an idealized or otherwise distorted picture of the social and political history out of which Americans have written and are writing. Non-white minority group members should be included, where appropriate, in any commentary on writers active during significant literary periods.

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